

Humanistic Religiosity

Parshat Ekev: [Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25](#)

Haftarah: [Isaiah 49:14-51:3](#)

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It is often lamented that there is not enough focus on God in contemporary Jewish life. However, simply pushing for increased focus on God would not be the solution to our problems. There is a unique teaching which, when properly understood, results in a complete paradigm shift that can radically alter the way a person interacts with others.

There is a classic principle, mentioned as a matter of Jewish law in the first chapter of the *Shulchan Aruch*, that a person must always place God before them. The *Mishnah Berurah* comments that one must in fact constantly imagine that they are standing in the Presence of God. Although this is easier said than done, the Torah tells us in this week's *Parsha* that we are asked, "Merely to fear God." The Talmud (Berachot 33b) raises the obvious question, "Is the fear of God so simple to accomplish?" The answer given is perplexing, "Yes! For Moses [who uttered this verse] it was a simple matter." However, the fact that true fear of Heaven was simple for the one and only Moses to achieve does not make it any easier for the rest of us.

Though a number of possible meanings have been suggested for this statement, I have always found the approach of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "the Rav" to be particularly inspiring and enlightening. The Rav suggests that we must simply add a comma so that the statement takes on an entirely new meaning. The sentence in the Talmud then becomes, "Yes for Moses [i.e. fear of Moses], was a simple matter." Read this way, the Talmud is telling us that although true fear of God is difficult to achieve, once one can cultivate reverence for their rabbi, teacher, or leader, - *only then* will they be able to develop true reverence for God.

We are accustomed to thinking that a religious person should become as "God-centered" as possible. However, it is very difficult for one to really feel as though they are in the presence of the Almighty at all times. Furthermore, when it comes to God people often rationalize that the Almighty, aware of all of our thoughts and motivations, will certainly understand whatever we choose to do. By contrast, however, when it comes to a human whom we revere and respect, if a person would always ask themselves, "What would I do if so-and-so were watching me right now?" the lucid imagery has the potential to have a profound, inescapable impact. It takes the concrete, realistic example of a respected role model to develop what Freud called the "ego ideal." Indeed, the Talmud tells us that

Joseph was only able to overcome the advances of Potiphar's wife because his illustrious father's image appeared before his eyes (Sotah 36b).

Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach added a similar comma into his prayer book that made a world of difference. He changed the statement in our morning blessings which reads, "A person should always be God-fearing, privately and publicly..." to read, "Always be a person, God-fearing in private and then in public..." He thereby noted that there are stages that must be traversed in developing true fear of Heaven, the first of which is simply developing oneself as a human being.

It seems to me that many people who consider themselves "religious" may have left out the most fundamental aspect of fear of God: The way we relate to our fellow human beings is the most basic step in becoming God-fearing. If this element is lacking, which it often is, one can not be considered truly God-fearing. May we all have the courage to recognize that we must first develop our relationships with those whom we look up to, and then ourselves as human beings, and *only then* can we ever hope to actually become "God-fearing."